



*Walking at Night  
Between the Two Deserts,*



*Selected Poems of  
W.S. Merwin*



*Edited by Raymond Soulard, Jr.,  
Kassandra Soulard, & Joseph Ciccone*

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S C R I P T O R P R E S S

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Two Deserts, Singing:  
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Number Fifty-seven

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*For our families,  
especially those loved and lost*



## Epitaph

Death is not information.  
Stone that I am,  
He came into my quiet  
And I shall be still for him.

## On the Subject of Poetry

I do not understand the world, Father.  
By the millpond at the end of the garden  
There is a man who slouches listening  
To the wheel revolving in the stream, only  
There is no wheel there to revolve.

He sits in the end of March, but he sits also  
In the end of the garden; his hands are in  
His pocket. It is not expectation  
On which he is intent, nor yesterday  
To which he listens. It is a wheel turning.

When I speak, Father, it is the world  
That I must mention. He does not move  
His feet so much as raise his head  
For fear he should disturb the sound he hears  
Like a pain without a cry, where he listens.

I do not think I am fond, Father,  
Of the way in which always before he listens  
He prepares himself by listening. It is  
Unequal, Father, like the reason  
For which the wheel turns, though there is no wheel.

I speak of him, Father, because he is  
There with his hands in his pockets, in the end  
Of the garden listening to the turning  
Wheel that is not there, but it is the world,  
Father, that I do not understand.

## Burning the Cat

In the spring, by the big shuck-pile  
Between the bramble-choked brook where the copperheads  
Curled in the first sun, and the mud road,  
All at once it could no longer be ignored.  
The season steamed with an odor for which  
There has never been a name, but it shouted above all.  
When I went near, the wood-lice were in its eyes  
And a nest of beetles in the white fur of its armpit.  
I built a fire there by the shuck-pile  
But it did no more than pop the beetles  
And singe the damp fur, raising a stench  
Of burning hair that bit through the sweet-day smell.  
Then thinking how time leches after indecency,  
Since both grief is indecent and the lack of it,  
I went away and fetched newspaper,  
And wrapped it in dead events, days and days,  
Soaked it in kerosene and put it in  
With the garbage on a heaped nest of sticks:  
It was harder to burn than the peels of oranges,  
Bubbling and spitting, and the reek was like  
Rank cooking that drifted with the smoke out  
Through the budding woods and clouded the shining dogwood.  
But I became stubborn: I would consume it  
Though the pyre should take me a day to build  
And the flames rise over the house. And hours I fed  
That burning, till I was black and streaked with sweat;  
And poked it out then, with charred meat still clustering  
Thick around the bones. And buried it so  
As I should have done in the first place, for  
The earth is slow, but deep, and good for hiding;  
I would have used it if I had understood  
How nine lives can vanish in one flash of a dog's jaws,  
A car, or a copperhead, and yet how one small  
Death, however reckoned, is hard to dispose of.

## The Shipwreck

The tale is different if even a single breath  
Escapes to tell it. The return itself  
Says survival is possible. And words made to carry  
In quiet the burden, the isolation  
Of dust, and that fail even so,  
Though they shudder still, must shrink the great head  
Of elemental violence, the vast eyes  
Called blind looking into the ends of darkness,  
The mouth deafening understanding with its one  
All-wise syllable, into a shriveled  
History that the dry-shod may hold  
In the palms of their hands. They had her  
Under jib and reefed mizzen, and in the dark  
Were fairly sure where they were, and with sea-room,  
And it seemed to be slacking a little, until  
Just before three they struck. Heard  
It come home, hollow in the hearts of them,  
And only then heard the bell ringing, telling them  
It had been ringing there always telling them  
That there it would strike home, hollow, in  
The hearts of them. Only then heard it  
Over the sunlight, the dozing creak  
Of the moorings, the bleaching quay, the heat,  
The coiled ropes on the quay they would sail  
And the day before, and across the water blue  
As a sky through the heat beyond  
The coils, the coils, with their shadows coiled  
Inside them. And it sprang upon them dark,  
Bitter, and heavy with sound. They began to go  
To pieces at once under the waves' hammer.  
Sick at heart since that first stroke, they moved  
Nevertheless as they had learned always to move

When it should come, not weighing hope against  
The weight of the water, yet knowing that no breath  
Would escape to betray what they underwent then.  
Dazed to, incredulous, that it had come,  
That they could recognize it. It was too familiar,  
And they in the press of it, therefore, as though  
In a drifting dream. But it bore upon them  
Bursting slowly inside them where they had  
Coiled it down, coiled it down: this sea, it was  
Blind, yes, as they had said, and treacherous—  
They had used their own traits to character it—but without  
Accident in its wildness, in its rage,  
Utterly and from the beginning without  
Error. And to some it seemed that the waves  
Grew gentle, spared them, while they died of that knowledge.



## Fog-Horn

Surely that moan is not the thing  
That men thought they were making, when they  
Put it there, for their own necessities.  
That throat does not call to anything human  
But to something men had forgotten,  
That stirs under fog. Who wounded that beast  
Incurably, or from whose pasture  
Was it lost, full grown, and time closed round it  
With no way back? Who tethered its tongue  
So that its voice could never come  
To speak out in the light of clear day,  
But only when the shifting blindness  
Descends and its acknowledged among us,  
As though from behind a wall, always  
Nearer that we had remembered? If it  
Was we who gave tongue to this cry  
What does it bespeak in us, repeating  
And repeating, insisting on something  
That we never meant? We only put it there  
To give warning of something we dare not  
Ignore, lest we should come upon it  
Too suddenly, recognize it too late,  
As our cries were swallowed up and all hands lost.

## Portland Going Out

Early that afternoon, as we keep  
Remembering, the water of the harbor  
Was so smooth you wanted to walk on it,  
It looked that trustworthy: glassy and black  
Like one of those pools they have in the lobbies  
Of grand hotels. And, thinking back, we say  
That the same bells we had heard telling  
Their shoals and hours since we were children,  
Sounded different, as though they were  
Moving about the business of strangers. By  
Five it was kicking up quite a bit,  
And the greasiest evening you ever saw,  
We had just come in, and were making fast,  
A few minutes to seven, when she went  
Down the harbor behind us, going out,  
Passing so close over our stern that we  
Caught the red glow of her port light for  
A moment on our faces. Only  
When she was gone did we notice  
That it was starting to snow. No, we were  
Not the last, nor even nearly the last  
To see her. A schooner that lived through it  
Glimpsed her, at the height of the storm,  
In a clear patch, apparently riding it;  
That must have been no more than minutes  
Before she went down. We had known storms  
Before, almost as brutal, and wrecks before  
Almost as unexplained, almost  
As disastrous. Yet we keep asking  
How it happened, how, and why Blanchard sailed,  
Miscalculating the storm's course. But what  
We cannot even find questions for





Is how near we were: brushed by the same snow,  
Lifted by her wake as she passed. We could  
Have spoken, we swear, with anyone on her deck,  
And not had to raise our voices, if we  
Had known anything to say. And now  
In no time at all, she has put  
All of disaster between us: a gulf  
Beyond reckoning. It begins where we are.

## Grandmother Dying

Not ridden in her Christian bed, either,  
But her wrenched back bent double, hunched over  
The plank tied to the arms of her rocker  
With a pillow on it to keep her head  
Sideways up from her knees, and three others  
Behind her in the high chair to hold her  
Down so the crooked might be straight, as if  
There was any hope. Who for ninety-three years,  
Keeping the faith, believed you could get  
Through the strait gate and the needle's eye if  
You made up your mind straight and narrow, kept  
The thread tight and, deaf to both left and to right  
To the sly music beyond the ditches, beat  
Time on the Book as you went. And then she fell.  
She should have did what she was told, she should  
Have called for what she needed, she did look  
Sleeping on the pillows and to be trusted  
Just for a bit, and Bid was not downstairs  
A minute before hearing the hall creak  
And the door crash back in the bathroom as  
She fell. What was it, eighteen months, they took  
Care of her crooked that way, feeding from  
The side, hunching down to hear her, all  
Knowing full well what the crooked come to  
When their rockers stop. Still could hear what she  
Thought good to hear, still croak: You keep my  
Candy hid in that sweater drawer, Bid,  
Only for company one piece, then you put it  
Back again, hear? One after the other  
A family of fevers visited her,  
And last a daughter-in-law with a nasty  
Cough combed her hair out pretty on the plank,  
With a flower in it, and held a mirror



For her to see till it made her smile, But  
Bid, she whispered, you keep wide of that new  
Nurse's cough, she has TB. And where  
Were the wars that still worried her, when  
Most were dead a long time ago, and one  
Son had come back and was there hanging  
In sunlight, in a medal of glory, on  
The wall in her room smelling of coal-gas  
And petunias. One daughter lived and dusted  
A nice brick house a block away, already  
Rehearsing how she'd say, "Well, we was always  
Good to our mumma anyway." Outside  
The crooked river flowed easy, knowing  
All along; the tracks smiled and rang away;  
Help would come from the hills. one knotted hand  
Of hers would hang up in the air above  
Her head for hours, propped on its elbow, waving  
In that direction. And when she heaved up  
Her last breath, to shake it like a fist,  
As out of a habit so old as to be  
Nearly absent, at the dirty river  
Sliding always there the same as ever,  
Came a black engine that had been waiting  
Up the tracks there for ninety-four years, and  
With its hooting downriver, making the tracks  
Staighen out in front of it like a whip,  
While the windows rattled loud to break, the things  
On the shelves shook, the folds of her face jarred  
And shivered; and when it was gone, for a long  
Time the goosed laundry still leaped and jiggled  
In the smutty wind outside, and her chair went on  
Rocking all by itself with nothing alive  
Inside it to explain it, nothing, nothing.

## The Drunk in the Furnace

For a good decade  
The furnace stood in the naked gully, fireless  
And vacant as any hat. Then when it was  
No more to them than a hulking black fossil  
To erode unnoticed with the rest of the junk-hill  
By the poisonous creek, and rapidly to be added  
To their ignorance,

They were afterwards astonished  
To confirm, one more, a twist of smoke like a pale  
Resurrection, staggering out of its chewed hole,  
And to remark then other tokens that someone,  
Cosily bolted behind the eyeholed iron  
Door of the drafty burner, had there established  
His bad castle.

Where he gets his spirits  
It's a mystery. But the stuff keeps him musical:  
Hammer-and-anviling with poker and bottle  
To his jugged bellowings, till the last groaning clang  
As he collapses onto the rioting  
Springs of a litter of car seats ranged on the grates,  
To sleep like an iron pig.

In their tar-paper church  
On a text about stoke holes that are sated never  
Their Reverend lingers. They nod and hate trespassers.  
When the furnace wakes, though all afternoon  
Their witless offspring flock like piped rats to its siren  
Crescendo, and agape on the crumbling ridge  
Stand in a row and learn.

## Air

Naturally it is night.  
Under the overturned lute with its  
One string I am going my way  
Which has a strange sound.

This way the dust, that way the dust.  
I listen to both sides  
But I keep right on.  
I remember the leaves sitting in judgment  
And then winter.

I remember the rain with its bundle of roads.  
The rain taking all its roads.  
Nowhere.

Young as I am, old as I am,

I forget tomorrow, the blind man.  
I forget the life among the buried windows.  
The eyes in the curtains.  
The wall  
Growing through the immortelles.  
I forget silence  
The owner of the smile.

This must be what I wanted to be doing,  
Walking at night between the two deserts,  
Singing.

## The Last One

Well they'd made up their minds to be everywhere because why not.  
Everywhere was theirs because they thought so.  
They with two leaves they whom the birds despise.  
In the middle of stones they made up their minds.  
They started to cut.

Well they cut everything because why not.  
Everything was theirs because they thought so.  
It fell into its shadows and they took both away.  
Some to have some for burning.

Well cutting everything they came to the water.  
They came to the end of the day there was one left standing.  
They would cut it tomorrow they went away.  
The night gathered in the last branches.  
The shadow of the night gathered in the shadow on the water.  
The night and the shadow put on the same head.  
And it said Now.

Well in the morning they cut the last one.  
Like the others the last one fell into its shadow.  
It fell into its shadow on the water.  
They took it away its shadow stayed on the water.

Well they shrugged they started trying to get the shadow away.  
They cut right to the ground the shadow stayed whole.  
They laid boards on it the shadow came out on top.

They shone lights on it the shadow got blacker and clearer.  
They exploded the water the shadow rocked.  
They built a huge fire on the roots.  
They sent up black smoke between the shadow and the sun.  
The new shadow flowed without changing the old one.  
They shrugged they went away to get stones.



They came back the shadow was growing.  
They started setting up stones it was growing.  
They looked the other way it went on growing.  
They decided they would make a stone out of it.  
They took stones to the water they poured them into the shadow.  
They poured them in they poured them in the stones vanished.  
The shadow was not filled it went on growing.  
That was one day.

The next day was just the same it went on growing.  
They did all the same things it was just the same.  
They decided to take its water from under it.  
They took away water they took it away the water went down.  
The shadow stayed where it was before.  
It went on growing it grew onto the land.  
They started to scrape the shadow with machines.  
When it touched the machines it stayed on them.  
They started to beat the shadow with sticks.  
Where it touched the sticks it stayed on them.  
They started to beat the shadow with hands.  
Where it touched the hands it stayed on them.  
That was another day.

Well the next day started about the same it went on growing.  
They pushed lights into the shadow.  
Where the shadow got onto them they went out.  
They began to stomp on the edge it got their feet.  
And when it got their feet they fell down.  
It got into eyes the eyes went blind.

The ones that fell down it grew over and they vanished.  
The ones that went blind and walked into vanished.  
The ones that could see and stood still  
It swallowed their shadows.  
Then it swallowed them too and they vanished.  
Well the others ran.

The ones that were left went away to live if it would let them.  
They went as far as they could.  
The lucky ones with their shadows.



## It is March

It is March and black dust falls out of the books  
Soon I will be gone  
The tall spirit who lodged here has  
Left already  
On the avenues the colorless thread lies under  
Old prices

When you look back there is always the past  
Even when it has vanished  
But when you look forward  
With your dirty knuckles and the wingless  
Bird on your shoulder  
What can you write

The bitterness is still rising in the old mines  
The fist is coming out of the egg  
The thermometers out of the mouth of the corpses

At a certain height  
The tails of the kites for a moment are  
Covered with footsteps

Whatever I have to do has not yet begun

## Wish

The star in my  
Hand is falling

All the uniforms know what's no use

May I bow to Necessity not  
To her hirelings

## River of Bees

In a dream I returned to the river of bees  
Five orange trees by the bridge and  
Beside two mills my house  
Into whose courtyard a blindman followed  
The goats and stood singing  
Of what was older

Soon it will be fifteen years

He was old he will have fallen into his eyes

I took my eyes  
A long way to the calendars  
Room after room asking how shall I live

One of the ends is made of streets  
One man processions carry through it  
Empty bottles their  
Image of hope  
It was offered to me by name

Once once and once  
In the same city I was born  
Asking what shall I say

He will have fallen into his mouth  
Men think they are better than grass

I return to his voice rising like a forkful of hay

He was old he is not real nothing is real  
Nor the noise of death drawing water

We are the echo of the future

On the door it says what to do to survive  
But we were not born to survive  
Only to live



## December Night

The cold slope is standing in darkness  
But the south of the trees is dry to the touch

The heavy limbs climb into the moonlight bearing feathers  
I came to watch these  
White plants older at night  
The oldest  
Come first to the ruins

And I hear magpies kept awake by the moon  
The water flows through its  
Own fingers without end

Tonight once more  
I find a single prayer and it is not for me

## A Scale in May

Now all my teachers are dead except silence  
I am trying to read what the five poplars are writing  
on the void

---

Of all the beasts to man alone death brings justice  
But I desire  
To kneel in a doorway empty except for the song

---

Who made time provided also its fools  
Strapped in watches and with ballots for their choices  
Crossing the frontiers of invisible kingdoms

---

To succeed consider what is as though it were past  
Deem yourself inevitable and take credit for it  
If you find you no longer believe enlarge the temple

---

Through the day the nameless stars keep passing the door  
That have come all that way out of death  
Without questions

---

The walls of light shudder and an owl wakes in the heart  
I cannot call upon words  
The sun goes away to set elsewhere

---

Before nightfall colorless petals blow under the door  
And the shadows  
Recall their ancestors in the house beyond death

---

At the end of its procession through the snow  
Falling  
the water remembers to laugh

## For the Anniversary of My Death

Every year without knowing it I have passed the day  
When the last fires will wave to me  
And the silence will set out  
Tireless traveler  
Like the beam of a lightless star

Then I will no longer  
Find myself in life as in a strange garment  
Surprised at the earth  
And the love of one woman  
And then shamelessness of men  
As today writing after three days of rain  
Hearing the wren sing and the falling cease  
And bowing not knowing to what

## In the Winter of My Thirty-Eighth Year

It sounds convincing to say *When I was young*  
Though I have long wondered what it would be like  
To be me now  
No older at all it seems from here  
As far from myself as ever

Waking in fog and rain and seeing nothing  
I imagine all the clocks have died in the night  
Now no one is looking I could choose my age  
It would be younger I suppose so I am older  
It is there at hand I could take it  
Except for the things I think I would do differently  
They keep coming between they are what I am  
They have taught me little I did not know when I was young

There is nothing wrong with my age now probably  
It is how I have come to it  
Like a thing I kept putting off as I did my youth

There is nothing the matter with speech  
Just because it lent itself  
To my uses  
Of course there is nothing the matter with the stars  
It is my emptiness among them  
While they drift farther away in the invisible morning



## Looking for Mushrooms

*for Jean and Bill Arrowsmith*

When it is not yet day  
I am walking on centuries of dead chestnut leaves  
In a place without grief  
Though the oriole  
Out of another life warns me  
That I am awake

In the dark while the rain fell  
The gold chanterelles pushed through a sleep that was not mine  
Waking me  
So that I came up the mountain to find them

Where they appear it seems I have been before  
I recognize their haunts as though remembering  
Another life

Where else am I walking even now  
Looking for me

## Now It Is Clear

Now it is clear to me that no leaves are mine  
no roots are mine  
that wherever I go I will be a spine of smoke in the forest  
and the forest will know it  
we will both know it

and that birds vanish because of something  
that I remember  
flying through me as though I were a great wind  
as the stones settle into the ground  
the trees into themselves  
staring as though I were a great wind  
which is what I pray for

it is clear to me that I cannot return  
but that some of us will meet once more  
even here  
like our own statues  
and some of us still later without names  
and some of us will burn with the speed  
of endless departures

and be found and lost no more

## End of Summer

High above us a chain of white buckets  
full of old light going home

now even the things that we do  
reach us after long journeys  
and we have changed

## The Unwritten

Inside this pencil  
crouch words that have never been written  
never been spoken  
never been taught

they're hiding

they're awake in there  
dark in the dark  
hearing us  
but they won't come out  
not for love not for time not for fire

even when the dark has worn away  
they'll still be there  
hiding in the air  
multitudes in days to come may walk through them  
breathe them  
be none the wiser

what script can it be  
that they won't unroll  
in what language  
would I recognize it  
would I be able to follow it  
to make out the real names  
of everything

maybe there aren't  
many  
it could be that there's only one word  
and it's all we need  
it's here in this pencil



every pencil in the world  
is like this

## Exercise

First forget what time it is  
for an hour  
do it regularly every day

then forget what day of the week it is  
do this regularly for a week  
then forget what country you are in  
and practice doing it in company  
for a week  
then do them together  
for a week  
with as few breaks as possible

follow these by forgetting to add  
or to subtract  
it makes no difference  
you can change them around  
after a week  
both will help you later  
to forget how to count

forget how to count  
starting with your own age  
starting with how to count backward  
starting with even numbers  
starting with Roman numerals  
starting with fractions of Roman numerals  
starting with the old calendar  
going on to the old alphabet  
going on to the alphabet  
until everything is continuous again



go on to forgetting elements  
starting with water  
proceeding to earth  
rising in fire

forget fire

### Passage

In autumn in this same life  
I was leaving a capital  
where an old animal  
captured in its youth  
one that in the wild  
would never have reached such an age  
was watching the sun set  
over nameless  
unapproachable trees  
and it is spring

## Yesterday

My friend says I was not a good son  
you understand  
I say yes I understand

he says I did not go  
to see my parents very often you know  
and I say yes I know

even when I was living in the same city he says  
maybe I would go there once  
a month or maybe even less  
I say oh yes

he says the last time I went to see my father  
I say the last time I went to see my father

he says the last time I saw my father  
he was asking me about my life  
how I was making out and he  
went into the next room  
to get something to give me

oh I say  
feeling again the cold  
of my father's hand the last time

he says and my father turned  
in the doorway and saw me  
look at my wristwatch and he  
said you know I would like you to stay  
and talk with me

oh yes I say

but if you are busy he said  
I don't want you to feel that you  
have to  
just because I'm here

I say nothing

he says my father  
said maybe  
you have important work you are doing  
or maybe you should be seeing  
somebody I don't want to keep you

I look out the window  
my friend is older than I am  
he says and I told my father it was so  
and I got up and left him then  
you know

though there was nowhere I had to go  
and nothing I had to do



## Berryman

I will tell you what he told me  
in the years just after the war  
as we then called  
the second world war

don't lose your arrogance he said  
you can do that when you're older  
lose it too soon and you may  
merely replace it with vanity

just one time he suggested  
changing the usual order  
of the same words in a line of verse  
why point out a thing twice

he suggested I pray to the Muse  
get down on my knees and pray  
right there in the corner and he  
said he meant it literally

it was in the days before the beard  
and the drink but he was deep  
in tides of his own through which he sailed  
chin sideways and head tilted like a tacking sloop

he was far older than the dates allowed for  
much older than I was he was in his thirties  
he snapped down his nose with an accent  
I think he had affected in England

as for publishing he advised me  
to paper my wall with rejection slips  
his lips and the bones of his long fingers trembled  
with the vehemence of his views about poetry

he said the great presence  
that permitted everything and transmuted it  
in poetry was passion  
passion was genius and he praised movement and invention

I had hardly begun to read  
I asked how can you ever be sure  
that what you write is really  
any good at all and he said you can't

you can't you can never be sure  
you die without knowing  
whether anything you wrote was any good  
if you have to be sure don't write



## Native Trees

Neither my father nor my mother knew  
the names of the trees  
where I was born  
what is that  
I asked and my  
father and mother did not  
hear they did not look where I pointed  
surfaces of furniture held  
the attention of their fingers  
and across the room they could watch  
walls they had forgotten  
where there were no questions  
no voices and no shade

Were there trees  
where they were children  
where I had not been  
I asked  
were there trees in those places  
where my father and my mother were born  
and in that time did  
my father and my mother see them  
and when they said yes it meant  
they did not remember  
What were they I asked what were they  
but both my father and my mother  
said they never knew

## For the Departure of a Stepson

You are going for a long time  
and nobody knows what to expect

we are trying to learn  
not to accompany gifts with advice

or to suppose that we can protect you  
from being changed

by something that we do not know  
but have always turned away from

even by the sea that we love  
with its breaking

and the dissolving days  
and the shadows on the wall

together we look at the young trees  
we read the news we smell the morning

we cannot tell you what to take with you  
in your light baggage

## On the Back of the Boarding Pass

In the airport by myself I forget  
where I am that is the way they are made  
over and over at such cost the ripped  
halls lengthening through stretches of echoes I  
have forgotten what day it is in this light  
what time it could be this was the same morning  
in which I mislaid the two timepieces  
they may turn up again timepieces can be  
bought but not the morning the waking  
into the wish to stay and the vanishing  
constants I keep returning to this was the  
morning of mending the fence where the black dog  
followed the water in after the last  
cloudburst and I kept on trying to tie  
a thread around the valley where we live  
I was making knots to hold it there in its  
place without changing as though this were the waking  
this seeming this passage this going through

## Green Fields

By this part of the century few are left who believe  
in the animals for they are not there in the carved parts  
of them served on plates and the pleas from the slatted trucks  
are sounds of shadows that possess no future  
there is still game for the pleasure of killing  
and there are pets for the children but the lives that followed  
courses of their own other than ours and older  
have been migrating before us some are already  
far on the way and yet Peter with his gaunt cheeks  
and point of white beard the face of an aged Lawrence  
Peter who had lived on from another time and country  
and who had seen so many things set out and vanish  
still believed in heaven and said he had never once  
doubted it since his childhood on the farm in the days  
of the horses he had not doubted it in the worst  
times of the Great War and afterward and he had come  
to what he took to be a kind of earthly  
model of it as he wandered south in his sixties  
by that time speaking the language well enough  
for them to make him out he took the smallest roads  
into a world he thought was a thing of the past  
with wildflowers he scarcely remembered and neighbors  
working together scything the morning meadows  
turning the hay before the noon meal bringing it in  
by milking time husbandry and abundance  
all the virtues he admired and their reward bounteous  
in the eyes of a foreigner and there he remained  
for the rest of his days seeing what he wanted to see  
until the winter when he could no longer fork  
the earth in his garden and then he gave away  
his house land everything and committed himself  
to a home to die in an old chateau where he lingered  
for some time surrounded by those who had lost





the use of body or mind and as he lay there he told me  
that the wall by his bed opened almost every day  
and he saw what was really there and it was eternal life  
as he recognized at once when he saw the gardens  
he had made and the green fields where he had been  
a child and his mother was standing there then the wall would close  
and around him again were the last days of the world

## Waves in August

There is a war in the distance  
with the distance growing smaller  
the field glasses laying at hand  
are for keeping it far away

I thought I was getting better  
about that returning childish  
wish to be living somewhere else  
that I knew was impossible  
and now I find myself wishing  
to be here to be alive here  
it is impossible enough  
to still be the wish of a child

in youth I hid a boat under  
the bushes beside the water  
knowing I would want it later  
and come back and find it there  
someone else took it and left me  
instead the sound of the water  
with its whisper of vertigo

terror reassurance an old  
old sadness it would seem we knew  
enough always about parting  
but we have to go on learning  
as long as there is anything

## Before the Flood

Why did he promise me  
that we would build ourselves  
an ark all by ourselves  
out in back of the house  
on New York Avenue  
in Union City New Jersey  
to the singing of the streetcars  
after the story  
of Noah whom nobody  
believed about the waters  
that would rise over everything  
when I told my father  
I wanted us to build  
an ark of our own there  
in the back yard under  
the kitchen could we do that  
he told me that we could  
I want to I said and will we  
he promised me that we would  
why did he promise that  
I wanted us to start then  
nobody will believe us  
I said that we are building  
an ark because the rains  
are coming and that was true  
nobody ever believed  
we would build an ark there  
nobody would believe  
that the waters were coming

## The Summer

After we come to see it and  
know we scarcely live without it  
we begin trying to describe  
what art is and it seems to be  
something we believe is human  
whatever that is something that  
says what we are but then the same  
beam of recognition stops at  
one penguin choosing a pebble  
to offer to the penguin he  
hopes to love and later the dance  
of awkwardness holding an egg  
on one foot away from the snow  
of summer the balancing on  
one foot in the flash of summer

## Wings

Among my friends here is an old man named  
for the first glimpse of light before daybreak  
he teaches flying that is to say he  
is able to fly himself and has taught  
others to fly and for them it is their  
only treasure but he has not taught me  
though I dream of flying I fly in dreams  
but when I see him he tells me of plants  
he has saved for me and where they come from  
a new one each time they have leaves like wings  
like many wings some with wings like whole flocks  
but they never fly he says or almost  
never though there are some that can and do  
but when they fly it is their only treasure  
he says that if he taught me how to fly  
it would be one treasure among others  
just one among others is what he says  
and he will wait he tells me and he speaks  
of his old friends instead and their meetings  
at intervals at a place where they fought  
a battle long ago when they were young  
and won and the ancient forest there was  
destroyed as they fought but when they return  
it rises again to greet them as though  
no harm had ever come to it and while  
they are there it spreads its wings over them

## The Name of the Air

It could be like that then the beloved  
old dog finding it harder and harder  
to breathe and understanding but coming  
to ask whether there is something that can  
be done about it coming again to  
ask and then standing there without asking

## To the Grass of Autumn

You could never believe  
it would come to this  
one still morning  
when before you noticed  
the birds already  
were all but gone

even though year upon year  
the rehearsal of it  
must have surprised  
your speechless parents  
and unknown antecedents  
long ago gathered to dust  
and though even the children  
have been taught to say  
the word *witherith*

no you were known to be  
cool and countless  
the bright vision on all  
the green hills  
rippling in unmeasured waves  
through the days in flower

now you are as the fog  
that sifts among you  
gray in the chill daybreak  
the voles scratch the dry earth  
around your roots  
hoping to find something  
before winter  
and when the white air stirs  
you whisper to yourselves  
without expectation  
or the need to know

## The Odds

His first winter in that city  
after years in the north a friend  
wrote to me of how people there  
were dealing with the cold  
he told me that crews  
were digging up the avenue  
down at the corner all day  
the men keeping a fire going  
in an old oil drum with holes  
down the sides and feeding it whatever  
turned up and he had been watching  
two men by the barrel with three  
gloves between them passing one  
glove back and forth  
while they stamped their feet  
and he had tried to tell whether  
it was a right or a left glove